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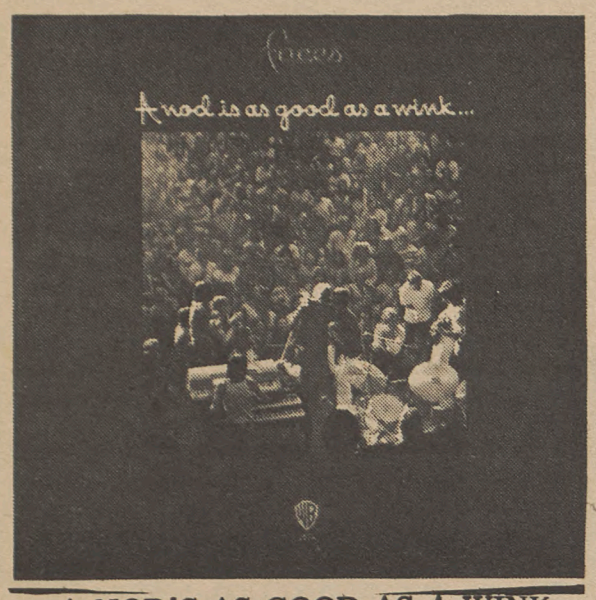

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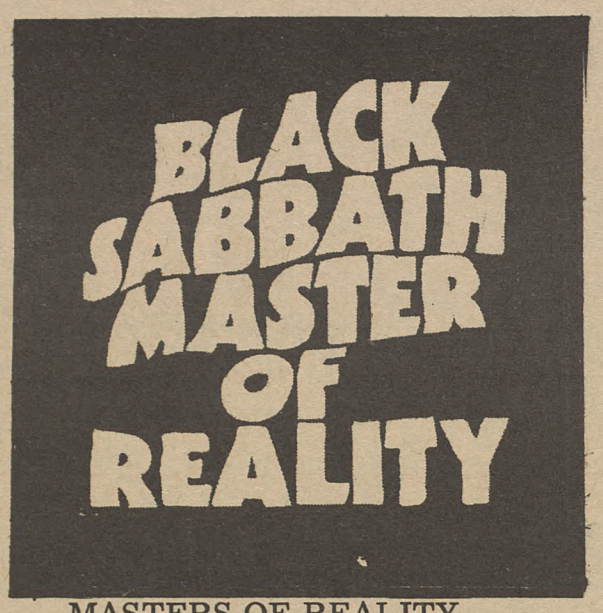

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Is Itchy Brother The Great American Plastic Ukelele Dream Come True?

by donia mills

"Hey," the drummer said to the club manager with a funny little smile, "you got a spare snare drum around here by any chance? I just broke a head." (His own head remaining remarkably together considering air time was less than ten minutes away...) The scene aptly enough, was Emergency--Georgetown's lovable cross between a warehouse and a conversation pit--and the event was an historical one: Washington's first live broadcast of a rock concert, in quadrophonic sound. The band was Itchy Brother (to be followed by the headliner, Exuma), and the only thing better than listening to it on WHFS was being there in the flesh.

With the drum head quickly replaced, the familiar honey-smooth voice of d. j."Cerphe" announced the occasion and Itchy Brother promptly kicked off with a solid wall of music that no doubt astounded anyone in the audience who was hearing them, as I was, for the first time. Itchy WHO? was my first reaction: how could anyone so relatively obscure be so utterly good?

Phil Blum manages to play a beautiful lead guitar, sing some gut-ripping vocals, and hold the group together without ever seeming to dominate the stage. Mike Nash plays a very fluid saxophone (after only 2 1/2 years on the instrument), trading off solos with Randy Ottinger, who is no slouch either. The fine work of pianist Guy Dorsey and Ace "the Bass" Hansmann does more than merely fill in the chinks; it weaves together the smooth, full-bodied flavor that is characteristic of Itchy Brother's sound.

As for John "Zero" Patterson, add perserverance to his list of other good qualities: when the substitute drum head (made in Japan) split during the first number, he just turned it over and played on the other side. "And that," he said later with typical equanimity, "was a drag."

I doubt if anybody else noticed, however, and Itchy Brother's overall performance that Sunday night was anything but a drag. Cerphe summed up his opinion very simply: "They're good! Their sense of timing and change is really nice. Each man is competent on his own, yet they play well together too. I really like them."

Emergency manager, Mike Schreibman claims that he chose Itchy Brother for the broadcast honors because "They're one of the most underrated groups in town. I want to see them make it."

I suspect that Itchy Brother would be pretty happy to see themselves make it, too. They've been at it a long time, counting their separate musical histories, which go back beyond the 15 months they've been playing together. Their original motives may have been varied, but the end result is the same: they all want to be professional musicians, both now and in the future. There isn't anything else they'd rather do.

For Guy, the lightening bolt struck during the mid-60's Beatles revolution. He decided at age 15 that he just had to be a rock and roll star--so he went out and bought a "cheesy plastic organ" for $25.

"I was a rock and roll star immediately," he confesses with modesty befitting a Virgo. "I didn't know chords or anything, but see, on this organ you could push a button and it would automatically play the whole chord." He never learned to read music, despite a year of piano lessons in the second grade, but learned to pick out melodies by ear listening to records and other musicians. Former groups he played with included the Nightcaps and the Northside Blues Band (long before the current blues revival) as well as the Vagrants, a local Battle of the Bands winner a few years back.

Bassist Ace Hansmann, fired with Arian determination, also began to play at age 15, without the benefit of formal lessons. He is a veteran of such local groups as Desdemona, Middle Earth (in 1967, along with Phil) and Stillrovin (in 69-70, along with Zero). He is also Itchy Brother's newest member, having replaced their original bassist last summer.

For some of the others in the group, school bands provided the musical training ground. "Sooner or later in elementary school," says Randy Ottinger, "some funny looking little man comes into your classroom and says, 'okay now, we want to give everybody a chance to play a musical instrument, so who wants to play what?'" At the age of 10 Randy had already decided on the trumpet, since his father and grandfather had both had stints as professional trumpet players.

All his years of lessons and practice paid off in 1968, when he landed a job with a Michigan-based road band named The Power and the Glory. "I'll tell you, that teaches you a lot about a musician's life fast--driving in blizzards at 2 a.m. in the midwest, to get from one one-nighter to the next."

As the practical and organized and discipline-minded Taurus of the group, Ottinger has his eggs scattered in several different baskets--clerking at the Pants Pub, teaching music lessons, doing some freelance photography, and attending classes at Montgomery College. But his playing with Itchy Brother, he insists, heads the list.

Zero is another who began in school bands, and went on to play drums in one local group after another. Before Stillrovin, he was with the Resumes from 67-69, hanging in there through all that band's various permutations. Like Ottinger, Patterson has also seen the darker side of the music life. "I thought I'd try California for a while, but I ended up broke, and stuck in L.A., and it was a pretty bad scene. All these speed freaks and junkies. As soon as I could, I split and came back to D.C."

Why does everyone always want to go to California? I asked innocently. Is California really the land of opportunity for musicians?

"No," quoth Leo, "but it's sure a lot warmer."

Mike Nash, at age 18, is the group's youngest member. With Aquarian abandon, he quit school in the 10th grade to devote full time to playing the saxophone. Currently he is traveling to New York City three times monthly for lessons. "And then I picked up the flute about eight months ago," he says casually--a fact the Emergency crowd bore happy witness to during the broadcast performance that Sunday night.

Which brings us to Phil Blum, Itchy Brother's leader and senior citizen, a classic Libra who seems to have packed an awful lot of living and feeling and music-making into his 23 years.

"From the time I was eight I was singing solo bits, in talent shows. In French." (He's a French citizen.) At ten, he was a sort of junior spokesman for the Montgomery County Little Singers, a group he performed with for several years.

About this time, he says, his parents bought him a plastic ukelele, a move they would live to regret--because from then on it was nothing but the Great American Plastic Ukelele Dream. "I went through the whole bit, you know, learning all the songs on the radio by ear, playing them on my plastic ukelele. My half-brother was singing rhythm and blues up in New York, and he turned me on to all the great R & B sounds that were big back then--groups like the Heartbeats, the Coasters. I developed a feeling for blues really early."

He also developed an unquenchable desire for electric guitar, which his parents staunchly resisted--an adversity their son obviously thrived upon. "When I was twelve I had to borrow an electric guitar so I could play with this band I was in at the time. When I was thirteen the folks finally broke down and got me an old junky acoustic guitar, and when I was fifteen they decided to let me take classical guitar lessons, which lasted about five weeks. I didn't have an electric guitar of my own until I was 17, and even then I had to buy it myself against my parents' wishes--saving up my lunch money, scrounging money from my friends, my enemies, anybody--to get together $25 for that guitar."

Even the eleven summers he spent camping and counseling at Camp Letts, under the wholesome auspices of the YMCA, contributed to his musical debauchery. "We spent all our spare time lying around listening to old blues on the local black station up there, and then copying it ourselves--people like B. B. King, when nobody had ever heard of B. B. King." Camp Letts was also where he first met Ace and Zero and Guy. ("Naturally, we were the most notorious guys there," Guy puts in. "We noticed each other right away.")

Their separate musical paths finally converged last fall, when they began jamming together, and their first professional gig together (as a four-man group, with the original bassist) was on December first of last year, at the Saint Albans coffeehouse.

"We were terrible," they all admit freely and cheerfully.

That first night they didn't even have a name. They had already rejected such possibilities as "Mox-Nix" and "Richard and the Sphere" and others they assure me are too bawdy even for Woodwind to print. Finally with Saint Alban's M. C. pressing them for a name, they conjured up a memory from their old degenerate days sitting around watching cartoons on TV.

"This show was called King Leonardo," Guy reminisces, "and there was one character named Biggy Rat who looked just like Zero, and then there was O. D. Cologne, and of course Itchy Brother was the bad guy. We figured we could always change our name something else after the gig, but we sort of liked it once we got used to it."

In their earlist days, the group relied a lot on blues standards, but when Nash began playing with them around March and they added Ottinger in May, they rewrote a lot of the music and underwent a rapid transition from rock and roll to a fuller, more jazz-oriented sound.

Another important change has been the gradual addition of more original songs to their repertoire. Phil does most of the song writing, with occasional ideas from the others.

"There are really two different ways I write songs," he explains "sometimes I'm driving along and suddenly I'll think of a whole song all at once, lyrics and melody and everything, all arranged. Pure emotion. Other times I really have to work at it, start with a certain lick and then work out chord progressions, then melody, and finally lyrics."

Their first song as a group was "The Long Song", which they closed out their WHFS set with, a rambling conglomerate that's sort of a 20 minute musical smorgasbord--very rich, very tasty. Basically they like to play funky songs that people can dance to--"When the audience gets off, that's when we really get off." Although so far they've had only mixed success in achieving this aim. Besides their coffehouse gigs, they've done some shows at Emergency and some outdoor concerts at P Street Beach and Fort Reno-but they've also played more than their share of "really lowdown gigs" at various redneck bars around town, which didn't seem to do a whole lot for either them or the juicers.

Then there was the time they had the ill fortune to play at RFK Stadium before the Senators next-to-last home game--an occasion which did not exactly bring the fans out in droves. "They put us on this tractor-drawn platform and wheeled us out to the middle of the infield and plugged us in," Randy recalls. "It was insane."

Another job they would especially like to forget was the $400 gig they were supposed to do at Prince George's Community College. Phil was even driving all the way home from California for the job, except his car blew up in the middle of the Mojave Desert and took two days to fix. They managed to make it anyway, by driving straight through, but arrived at the college a couple hours late to find that another group had been moved into their time slot. After they'd waited around a mere eight hours to play their set, the organizers told them to go on home and don't worry about it, they would be paid anyway (but later boys, later) since they did at least come and hang around all that time. (Needless to say, later --and the money--never came.)

"Not to mention the fact that we had three mikes stolen that night," Zero adds sweetly.

No, the ones Itchy Brother prefers to remember are the concert they did with Sageworth at Gaston Hall last February, and most of all their regular Tuesday and Sunday-night stints at the Apple Pie, just up the street from Emergency. With the Apple Pie crowd they feel they really have a loyal following--"they dance and clap and scream and have a great time, and they tell us they're going to come back and hear us again next week"--although it's pretty much limited to the over-20's group. Itchy Brother's music definitely seems to appeal to older people, being a bit too jazzy or sophisticated or something to hit the bubblegum set where they really live. And this can be a problem, with rock audiences getting younger all the time.

"Washington is a very tough town to try and get a start in," Mike claims, which seems to be the unanimous lament of local musicians. "There just aren't that many good places you can play!"

"And it's always hard to get people to accept good, original music," Zero points out. "They'd rather listen to inferior rehashes of top-40 type tunes they can recognize and hum along with." So, in order to keep those dollars and cents rolling in, club owners and promoters will often pass up more serious, original groups to hire the kind of second-rate stuff that will keep the customer satisfied.

Well, this is nothing new either--the spectre of the crass and philistine businessman controlling an artistic medium he has no real appreciation of or interest in, other than making money. Filmmakers and playwrites and artists and writers complain about the same thing. That just seems to be one of the facts of showbiz life-how good you are doesn't necessarily determine how successful you'll be. (Witness such extreme examples as Roy Buchanan and Grand Funk Railroad...)

Look at it this way: the guys could always go back to selling mod clothes and washing Toyotas, if it was security they wanted. Phil could always go back to being a printer, the trade he was trained for, if a 9 to 5 job was what he wanted.

But that's not what they want either,

Ultimately, they all agree, the ideal would be to become so proficient and versatile on your particular instrument that you could afford to operate independently, into and out of whatever musical projects happened to appeal to you at any given time. (Ah, the freedom of being a Bobby Keys or a Ry Cooder... or even a Nils Lofgren.)

But for the time being, Itchy Brother will settle for some decent-paying jobs, so they can afford to buy some equipment (they still have to borrow amplifiers and PAs for all their gigs), and maybe get into the concert circuit, and eventually into a recording studio.

"Rock today is heading toward jazz, no doubt about it," Phil maintains. And that fact, plus the recent demise of Claude Jones and the departure of Sageworth and the apotheosis of Grin puts Itchy Brother in a pretty good jockeying position among Washington bands for all that new room at the top.

Things may be looking up for the D. C. rock community on other fronts as well. Emergency, for instance, is currently rejuvenating its image with a surge of new national and international bands, as well as top local talent.

And, Cerphe says (getting back to that live broadcast), WHFS will probably be doing a lot more live shows since the Itchy Brother/Exuma program was such a success. "I think it's a good thing for radio to get into, this sort of community thing." (Like, a people's radio station carrying a broadcast from a people's club of a people's band.) "I'll tell you, it's taken D. C. a long time to come this far."

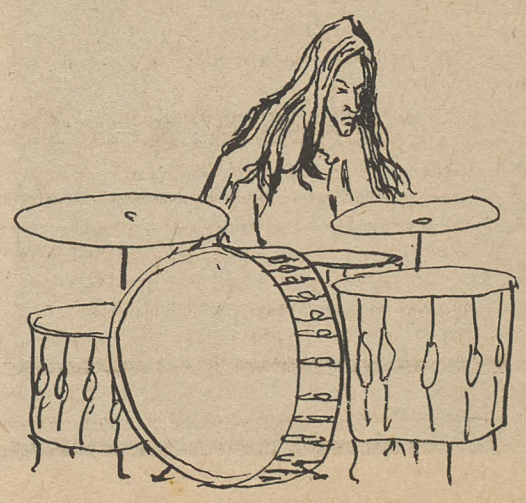
It's quite a distance Itchy Brother has come, too, since that December night they first played at Saint Alban's. And they are all soberly (and sometimes not so soberly) aware of the distance they still have to go.

Phil, his Libran mind forever weighing both sides of the picture, says there's always that depressing possibility that by the time recognition comes for a band, their style will be passe. The trick, it seems, is to sustain enough drive and enthusiasm to keep on trucking in spite of the occupational hazards which inevitably beset a rock band--the tedium of playing the same songs night after night, the hassles with equipment and transportation and money, the personality conflicts that arise.

"You've got to realize," Zero reminds me, "that the more dynamic and creative something is, the quicker it can go stale on you; more bands break up because of simple stagnation than any other reason." That's why changes in one form or another--change of personnel, versatility in styles, constant renewal of material--is such a big factor in the success of long-standing groups like Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead.

One of Phil's early compositions, "Song for Musicians," sums up one of the hazards that bothers Itchy Brother the most--the frustration of trying to make music for an unapprciative audience. "The lyrics talk about how sometimes you play your ass off, and when you've finally finished this dynamite tune you look out there and there's no response, absolutely nothing, all you get is the tinkling of ice in glasses."

But Zero lightens it up a little with a Leonine, if ironic, smile. "Unfortunately, that song was written in six-eight time, and nobody can dance to it. So we don't play that one much anymore."



AN INTERVIEW:

THE VERY PROFESSIONAL

AL KOOPER

Suzanne & Bob Gordon

Al Kooper, founder of Blues Project and Blood, Sweat & Tears, gave us this interview on November 11, at the Cellar Door. A After what he described as a "mediocre set", (but one which his fans, who packed the club, obviously enjoyed) we spent an enjoyable half hour talking about his life as a rock musician and producer. With him were drummer Roy Markowitz and bassist John Paul Fetta, with whom he is touring and recording.

Kooper, whose Super Session jams with Mike Bloomfield and Steve Stills cinched his star status, has produced, arranged, and played on two recent albums in his present position as producer for Columbia Records. They are I Stand Alone and New York City City (You're a Woman).]

Woodwind I read in "Rolling Stone" about you and BS&T maybe getting back together. What's happening with that?

Kooper It was over before it was printed. It was supposed to happen but it got too weird, so it didn't happen.

Woodwind Is there any hassle between you and those guys?

Kooper Well, I don't know what kind of hassle there could be, because they're Blood, Sweat & Tears and I'm me and they're doing what they do and I'm doing what I do. There might've been a hassle... that's why it didn't happen.

Woodwind What are you doing these days?

Kooper Playing a lot of gigs, producing a little -- produced an album by my best friend which will be out this week. His name is Mike Gately. He's on Janus Records, a division of Chess.

Woodwind What kind of music does he play?

Kooper It's real mellow music. The name of the album is Gately's Cafe. It's all his songs except a couple which I wrote. It's real nice, there are cats from Hookfoot and Free playing on it -- it was cut in England. I'm real proud of it, I think it's the best thing I've ever been connected with and I think something big might happen with it.

Woodwind Is it more along the lines of Appaloosa's music, as opposed to BS&T's music? (Appaloosa had sort of a soft acoustic rock sound which Kooper beefed up, when he was working with them on Columbia, with horns.)

Kooper Yeah, there's nothing that even remotely resembles BS&T on that record; I mean, it's a real easy-going sound. Mike Gately's a far out guy -- he weighs about 400 pounds, but he's got this real tiny, sweet voice -- he plays guitar, writes, sings. He can't play too much because his fingers are so big! But, he plays --what he plays -- real nice, finger picks. He's been on a lot of my albums, singing background. We have very high hoped for him

Woodwind What are you doing now, outside of music? Where are you living?

Kooper I live in New York City. I just moved into a new apartment and I've been getting it together. It's a far out place, it's uptown, in a quiet neighborhood near the park. I bought a four-poster bed and put a parachute over it and I had a beautiful custom-made stereo system put in -- it's outrageous! but I'm really going to get into staying home a lot.

Woodwind What have you been doing, as opposed to "staying home a lot"?

Kooper Well, I was married, you know? After that I was hanging out a lot and now I really want to stay home.

Woodwind Yeah, I know what you mean. Whose music are you into now?

Kooper I like the Band's new album and Van Morrison's album. I always have really liked the Swan Silvertones, a gospel group. That's my favorite band. Those three groups are all I've been listening to.

Woodwind Was that a "Flying V" I saw on stage?

Kooper Yeah, I use that in the next set.

Woodwind That's a far out guitar. Was that a little synthesizer you were using on "Baby, Please Don't Go"?

Kooper Yeah.

Woodwind Are you gigging all the time with John Paul and Roy

Kooper Yeah, all the time. We've been together for about a year. John Paul's gonna make an album and I'm gonna produce that. He sings, too. That's the next production thing I'm gonna do. I'm just going to keep it in the family, you know?

Woodwind Yeah.

Kooper Cause it works out better that way. I tried to do this big band in New York called Freeway, but they didn't trust me and I didn't trust them 'cause we didn't know each other...So I just can't do anything now but work with people who know me and people that I know.

Woodwind Where are you recording?

Kooper I've been recording in L.A. and London. I don't think I'm gonna record in L.A. anymore, I think I'm gonna just record in London from now on. The studios are fantastic there, the musicians are great. I feel very comfortable there. The mixing facilities are better in the U.S. but the studios in London are outrageous. And, I have a nice band there that I like to use to record.

Woodwind Who is it?

Kooper It alternates, it's made up of all kinds of people. Like, there's Caleb Clay, Roger Pulp, and a bass player named Herbie Flowers, from a band called Blue Mink and also guitar player Alan Parker from Blue Mink, a guy who used to be in Free -- there's several people, all great studio cats.

Woodwind Are you writing a lot of songs?

Kooper Yeah, a lot. I've been writing some weird songs, very strange--

Woodwind Weird? How?

Kooper They might be constructed really strangely they might have weird chords or a weird melody, there might be a weird story, you know, something weird is coming out with each song right now.

Woodwind Where do you think they're coming from?

Kooper It's a real strange period in my songwriting right now. I don't know why. I'm gettingsome weird ideas and they're working out. This album's gonna be interesting to me. It's a double album; one record will be this gig (at the Cellar Door) and the other will be studio stuff from L.A. and London. After this gig, I'm flying to London to finish it. I cut a couple of tracks in L.A. already. Actually, I cut six I'm only going to use two though.

Woodwind Is it mostly your own stuff?

Kooper Yeah. I'm doing some songs written by other people, a few. I'm doing one Smokey Robinson song, "Sweat for You". It was never released as a single, but it's kind of a ghetto hit.

(AT THIS point, a D.C. musician who was in the room with us -- along with some other musicians, some Columbia people and some Cellar Door folks -- asked Kooper if he might play some Congas on a song in the next set. Kooper's response was interesting, we thought, and led into a whole rap that illustrates Kooper's ideas about being a professional musician.)

Kooper Well, we just want to make it the three of us, you know? We want to make that point. That's why we're doing a live album. We've got our playing to a certain level that we're real happy about and we want to put it on tape.

(PROBABLY because of Kooper's gig at the Cellar Door, the FM disc jockey whose program had been the background for the entire interview, beganplayingsome of Kooper's music -- some old BS&T and Blues Project songs and them some cuts off Kooper's last two albums.)

Kooper That's me! I've been in Washington for a week and that's the first time I've heard myself!

Woodwind On "Baby, Please Don't Go", you were getting into some pretty free kinds of stuff, like the kind of stuff I associate with John Coltrane or Pharoah Sanders.

Kooper (laughing) Well, it's not that free! (To Roy Markowitz Hey, Roy. Would you say about 50 percent of the stuff on stage is free, not planned?

Markowitz About 40 percent free, just messing around.

Kooper There's a lotta open room with a three'man band, there can be a lot of bass solos, a few drum solos. With us right now, it just feels like a very cohesive unit.

Woodwind Yeah, the last time we saw you (at the Laurel Race Track "Rock Festival" in 1969) you were playing with a whole brass section behind you! In terms of the structure of your music music now, do you kind of feel out the audience before you know h how loose to let it go?

Kooper Well, we never plan a set. The only thing we know is like the opening and closing numbers. Then we decide, on the basis of the audience vibrations, what to do next.

Woodwind It looked to me like it was pretty unplanned.

Kooper We're very casual. I like to entertain people. I don't like to be full of shit, you know?

Woodwind Yeah. Sometimes in a place as small as the Cellar Door, there can be so much distance set up by the performer between the audience and what's going on onstage.

Kooper I'm very much against that. We get criticized for what we do. It's just... The whole thing is done with a grain of salt. 'Cause we have a really good time -- if we didn't, we'd rather not play.

Woodwind Do you try to avoid being really serious about the trip?

Kooper No, it's not that, I'm very serious about it. But, I still take it all with a grain of salt. (About the DJ who is now playing the third Al Kooper song in a row:) Who payed this guy off?

Woodwind It must be WHFS.

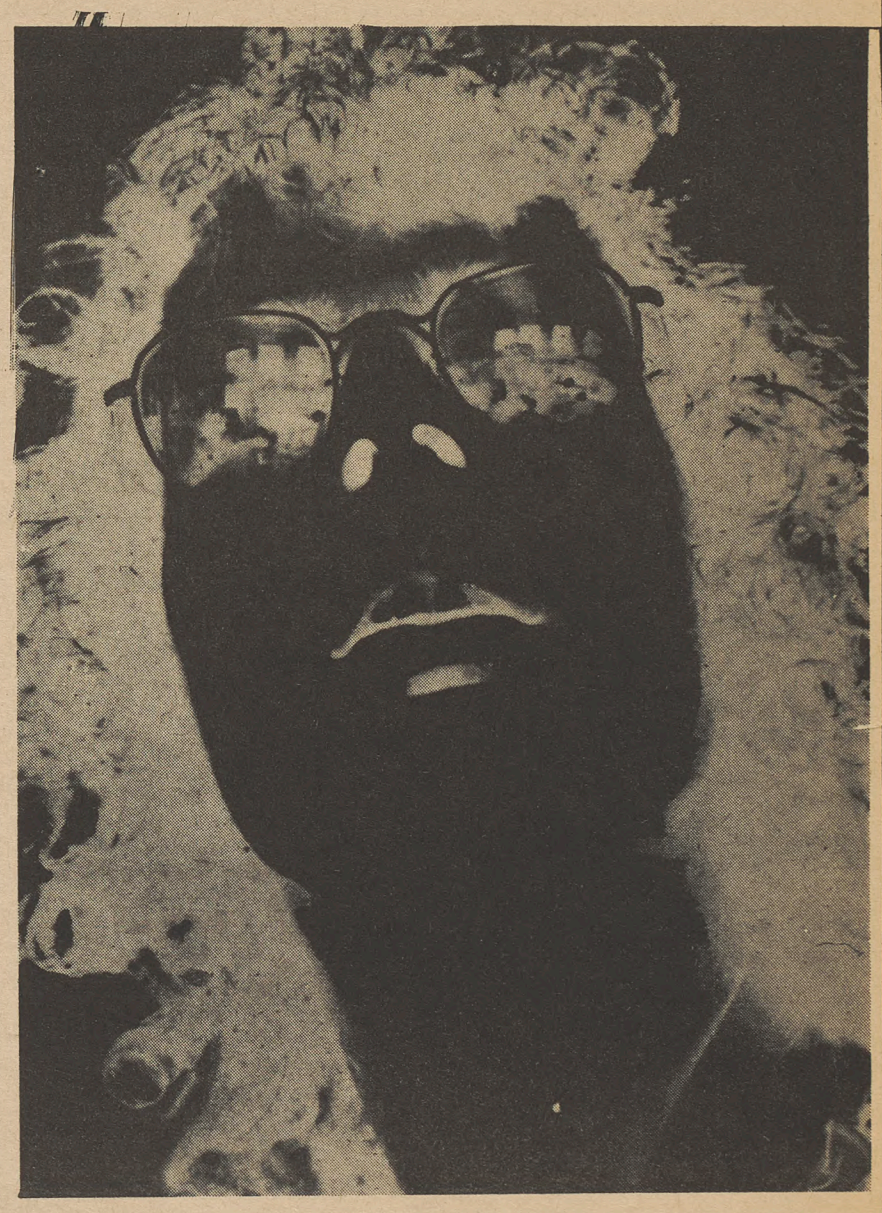
Kooper It must be WSTONED! The thing about this business is -- you know ... anybody in the audience... There but for the grace of God goes you or I. It could be anybody on stage, you know? It just happens to be me. I could be sitting in the audience watching someone else...sometimes I do. So, I mean, I'm no different than you. I want people to understand that. Being the way I am onstage is the best way for people to understand that, without having it explained to them. Just go up, no pretense or anything. It's just that I've been given a little --something -- to entertain with. And I'm gonna do that and I enjoy doing that and that's the trip. I've been into music for a long time and I feel totally committed to it. We always play the best we can. Sometimes I think the audience doesn't do enough.

Woodwind Is it hard to keep getting it up?

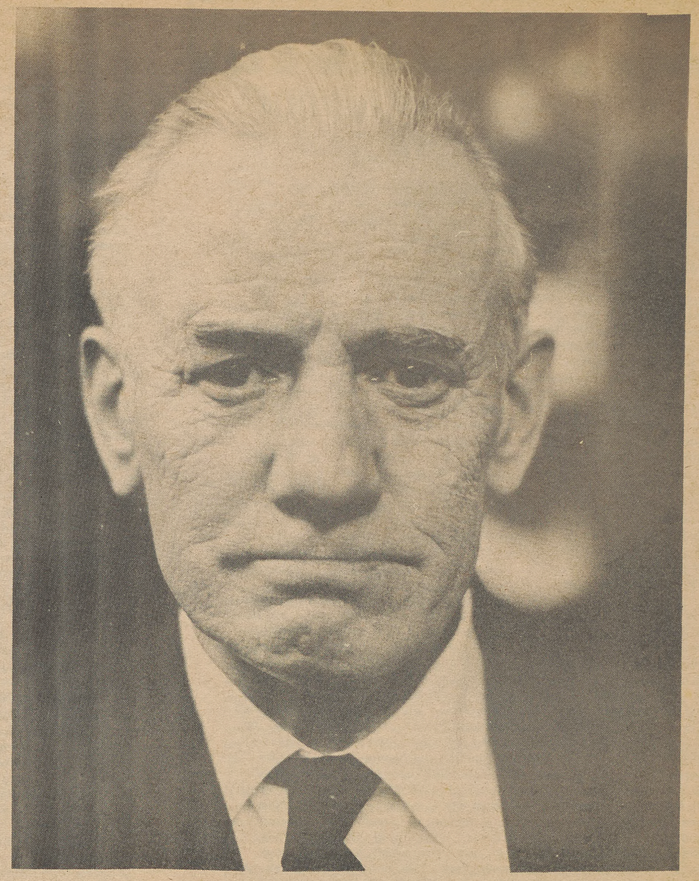
Kooper No. The only reason we're there is to play. We don't dig the travelling, we don't dig the bad food and the shitty hotels and the chicks who look like gorillas. We like to play. And if everbody just makes it easier for us to do that and gives us a little something, they'll get a whole lot in return. If they make it hard for us, then it's just hard for us to play well for them.

(AT THIS point, the DJ gave a stoned, but authoritative-sounding rap about the meaning of Kooper's song, "The Warning", which had just finished playing. Kooper listened intently, with a long-suffering look on his face, then laughingly, but firmly, addressed the radio:)

Kooper That's not what I said in the song, Mister!



Tim Einstein



COUNTERNOTES

BRUCE ROSENSTEIN

FLOWERS OF EVIL -- Mountain - Windfall 5501
MYLON WITH HOLY SMOKE -- Columbia C 31085

One of the oddities of Mountain's albums, including the Leslie West "solo" album, was that one side tended to be stronger than the other. In some cases, it was in each listener's mind, especially on Climbing!, their masterpiece. Nantucket Sleighride was somewhat more even, but there was still the feeling that the album was spread a little thin.

Now comes their new album, Flowers of Evil, and the same problem is still there, only it's gotten worse. Side one, the studio side, is very good, but side two is live and just doesn't make it. The first of two things on side two, recorded at Fillmore East, of course, is called "Dream Sequence", and it's aptly titled because it is a remarkable cure for insomnia, although you've got to keep the volume low. I've tried listening to this side a few times, and twice my mind just hopelessly wandered because there is so little to the music here, and once I fell asleep. The discouraging aspect of this is that Mountain has developed into an excellent live band, yet the performance chosen for the album is mediocre, at best. It's too bad that their performance at Catholic University last fall wasn't recorded, it was much better than what has been served up here. We just don't need another version of "Roll Over Beethoven", even if it is live and done by Leslie West. And, after "Dream Sequence", we are given a live version, as if that were necessary, of "Mississippi Queen". Come on! The studio version couldn't be topped, the live version is basically the same only it's not as good. The record is going to sell whether or not "Mississippi Queen" is on it.

So, side two is so uninspiring that after a few listens, you just don't want to go back and listen to it again. But side one is totally enjoyable, and is enough to draw you to the album. The standout cut, at least in these early stages, is the title cut, which, strangely enough, is the only song on the side that West had a hand in writing. It is also the only one on which he sings lead, which is also kind of strange that Felix Pappalardi now has taken on the bulk of the writing and singing, along with production. Flowers of Evil deals with the hard drug problem in the Armed Forces in SouthEast Asia, as the parents of a young soldier see their son come home a heroin addict. "Oh, can you tell me/How the joy passed from his childhood/That's not my boy. He's re-enlisted for three years'more/ Is the price of peace worth the price of war?" West's guitar work on this cut is atypical of his usual style, sounding almost Creedence-like with a pushing, chunky rhythm. "Crossroads" is fairly good hard rock despite the ordinary lyrics, and "One Last Cold Kiss" and "Pride and Passion", are good classically influenced rock, the latter sounding almost more classical than rock. There is also a short classical piano piece, "King's Chorale", which I assume was played by Steve Knight but was written by Pappalardi.

Flowers of Evil is not Mountain's best album; it is nowhere near Climbing!, and isn't even as good as Nantucket Sleighride, but it will be appreciated by Mountain fans. If you are not a Mountain fan but like heavy music, get into something like Climbing! first and get to this one later on. It can wait.

If you are wondering where Mylon fits in with Mountain, maybe the quote on the back of Mylon's new album will help: "I will have made three albums during the year. Two will have been of Mountain and this is the third." - Felix Pappalardi. Felix started working with the group shortly after their first LP was released last year on a different label, and with Allen Touissaint as producer Mylon and Holy Smoke, his fine band, have been touring with Mountain for a year now, and they are one of the best live bands around They got a good response at Catholic with Mountain, but were all but ignored as they played beautifully to an audience which had come to Merriweather Post Pavillion to see Ten Years After. Mylon on stage reminds one of a cross between Elvis Presley and Joe Cocker. Besides his great moves,; he is a great singer. His full name is Mylon LeFevre , and his family is one of the oldest and most respected gospel groups in the country. Mylon and his band are from the Deep South, and he even studied to be a preacher at one time, but gave it up in favor of rock and roll. He can rock with the best of them and he can also do great things with country material.

The band has a couple of fine guitarists, a great keyboard player, and also a backing chorus which always travels with the band, and adds to the gospel effect. Lead guitarist Auburn Burrell is the man beside Mylon himself who is featured most prominently on the album. He plays good, clean country guitar, and can play monstrous hard rock guitar. For the best example of his devilish rock playing, check out his lead work on the song "Louisiana Bullfrog" by David Rea on the latters new album, By the Grace of God. Auburn can also play sweet pedal steel guitar, and does so on two cuts here, "mountain Home" and "Railroad Angels", the two most country tunes on the album. The pedal steel does get buried a little to deep in the mix, though. "Mountain Home" is a beautiful little country tune, with the usually great vocal by Mylon and also a great filling organ by "Mad Oscar" Langdale. "Railroad Angels" is a slow country son, and there is also a good rock version of "Sixteen Tons" Mickey Newberry "Why You Been Gone So Long" is a particularly nice country offering, with a gospel touch. "Angel Band" is a pretty country hymn, leading into a short tribute to Louis Armstrong. "Pool Shooter" and "Wonerin'" are good straighforward hard rock, but the best thing of all is the hard driving story of the band "Holy Smoke Doo Dah Band". Everybody just plays perfectly on this and if you hear them do it live it is twice as good. It's as good an anthem for a band as there is. They do two Mountain songs, and unfortunately, the new arrangements don't do anything for the songs. "Baby I'm Down" works well enough, but "Silver Paper" falls flat on its face because not only doesn't that song lend itself to Mylon"s arrangement, but it is one of those songs which were done absolutely perfectly in the original form and are virtually impossible to improve upon.

Despite these small complaints, this album has a lot to offer to almost anybody, and do see them live if you get the chance If you are speculating on who has the talent and flair and background to be very big, Mylon's name would have to be right up there. Georgia has been good to us for rock, what with the Allman Brothers Band and Wet Willie. Add Mylon to that list, because they know what rockin's all about.

SHAKEY LEGS -- Paramount - PAS 6022

When I first played this album, I had no idea who this group was. I still don't. I mainly put on the album because I didn't feel like listening to anything else, and I figured that I should give it a chance, after all, maybe it's would be good. Good?! It's damn great! You seldom hear anything like this these days; undiluted, brutal, decadent, down-at-the-heels rock.

That front cover won't win any awards, and there are no liner notes other than bare information on who wrote and sings what and other little facts. So, I was unprepared for the assault that was awaiting me. Shakey Legs is loud and crude and you'll love them.

I wasn't sure of what I thought of it until about half way through the first song, "Dirty Dog Woman", but then it hit me that this was something else, mighty good, and them by the third song, "Back in Line", I was completely won over. Dese here guys can ROCK. That picture shows them looking like maybe the Illusion, or any number of those Long Island bands. (I don't have any idea of where Shakey Legs comes from.) They don't look as overtly strange as, say, Black Oak Arkansas, but there is something decidedly greasy and seedy about them. An air of the grill at a greasy spoon restaurant. Shakey Legs could be the house band at a Top 40 bar where nobody listens to what you're doing even if you're breaking their eardrums, or a mid-Sixties Long Island band, or a small town band trying to make enough bread playing high schools and churches to leave town, or maybe a gang of 'Fifties hoodlums who could also play guitars.

They are not as enjoyable as the J. Geils Band or the Flamin' Groovies, but they do have some things in common with those bands They are into rocking, and they are into really low-down, authentic ass-kicking rock. Shakey Legs isn't as good as those bands, who play with a sense of humor and are better at their axes than Shakey Legs is. They don't play as well, but they sound like they are doin their primitive rock straight, like they don't know how to do it any other way.

When they do harmonies, their voices blend fairly well. They are pretty tight, and they have one member who stands out as being pretty talented: singer/songwriter/keyboard player Nick Lauritzen Sometimes, he sings like an unpretentious David Clayton-Thomas. Other times, he sounds like he's been doing a lot of Romilar, and sniffing old shoe laces just for added kicks. They all sound as if they were dedicated glue-sniffers in their youth. The name of one of their "production assistants" sums a few things up... his name is Bill Downer.

Shakey Legs may not be doing anything new, but what they do they do well, and with a feeling of authenticity rather than a sense of humor, or clinical interest, or a detached attitude of "We're-all-above-this-but-we-like-to-rock-for-a-goof". Shakey Legs plays rock from the wrong side of the tracks, and you're bound to love them if you give them a chance. Here's hoping that Nick Lauritzen becomes a big rock'n'roll star.

THE LOW SPARK OF HIGH HEELED BOYS --Traffic -Island SW 9306

Before this album was released, I had my doubts about Traffic. Reports from England this summer indicated that the band was continually sounding lackluster and hadn't gotten it c on in a while. Welcome to the Canteen was a fine album, and it was live, but it was their own older standard material, except for Dave Mason's "Sad and Deep as You", so, from a performanc and excitement standpoint, it was a successfull album, but it left us up in the air as to what the band was doing in the area of songwriting and what they would be doing without Mason. So what would their new album sound like? Well, rest easy, for Traffic has provided for us. The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys is an album full of delights. Six longer songs, all new and original.

For one thing, the new personnel finally seem to be jelling. Winwood is still at the center and well in control of the band, which is as it should be, but the rest of the band seems to be fitting together well. Jim Gordon and Rick Grech work as a solid and efficient, if unexciting rhythm section. However, I still prefer jim Capalki as a drummer. Capaldi is now a sometimes vocalist for the band, and it's hard to see where he really fits into the picture these days. He claims this is what he wants to be doing, apparently he didn't love playing drums, but he's not all that great a singer. He's not nearly as good as Winwood and the songs on which he sings lead, Stevie could have done just as well. But that's the way they want it.

Outside of Winwood's perfect guitar and keyboard work, special credit must be given to percussionist "Reebop" Kwaku Baah, who constantly adds brilliant touches on congas and provides a steady support for Traffic's wandering, jazzy sound. And, of course, Chris Wook, who is always there doing something astounding on flute and saxaphone, especially flute. Traffic just couldn't be Traffic without Wood.

To the songs, now. The absolute high point here is the 12 minute title cut. It starts off very slow and suspenseful., and blossoms into a quick moving song with some good, unpretentious lyrics like "The percentage you're paying is too high priced/ And you're living beyond all your means And the man in the suit has just bought a new car from the profit he's made off your dreams". and" If you had just a minute to breathe/ and they gave you one final wish/ Would you ask for something like another chance/." It gives Wood a good chance to show off his sax playing. The other really first class song is "Hidden Treasure", with Winwood in good vocal form, and it's a very nice typical Traffic song.

The lyrics aren't much, but they'll do. "Many a Mile to Freedom -- seven and a half minutes in length -- is also exceptional, with Winwood firmly at the helm. Where things slip just a bit, but not enough to spoil any of the fun, is on the non-Winwood tunes. "Rock and Roll Stew", which has been divided into two parts for a single was written by Gordon and Grech, and is another of those Travelling Truckin' Band songs. I can safely say that it doesn't have anything on "Truckin'", but it's a good song nevertheless, and as everything here, sounds like Traffic, and no one else, even though Capaldi is singing. Jim also sings on "Light Up or Leave Me Alone" (They always did have a knack for titles.), which is good but not great. It starts off with a weird guitar from Winwood playing a circus-type riff and goes into some fairly good rocking. "Rainmaker" is nicely done Traffic head music.

The title cut of this album should be a classic, and the rest of the material is solid, although it won't knock you out. Most of it is better than what they were into right before and after they broke up. However, I do feel that their sound would be enhanced if Winwood would concentrate on vocals and keyboards, and if another guitarist would be brought in. An excellent choice would be ex-Fairport Convention wizard Richard Thompson, who was rumored to be joining the band last year. And he's a great singer also, much better than Capaldi. A combination of the talents of Winwood and Thompson would be staggering. It's something to think about, in any case.

All of these personal preferences aside, this is a fine album, and a reassuring one. Traffic is still in a class by itself.

BLESS THE WEATHER - John Martyn - Island SW 9311 -

John Martyn is a young Scottish singer/songwriter who recorded two beautiful and overlooked albums for Warner Brothers Stormbringer! and Road To Ruin; both recorded with his wife Beverly. Everybody who has heard Stormbringer! loves it, and it was hailed in reviews as a classic. It is an especially beautiful album made during their first visit to Woodstock from England in the early summer of 1969, pre-festival. Road To Ruin was more jazz oriented, and it may be as good an album, but I don't have a copy of it so I wasn't able to get into it enough. When I heard that John was going to do a solo album without Beverly and that he would now be on Island Records in this country, I was hoping that he would come off as well without her, and that he would get the needed support from his record company. Now that the album is out, John shows he can do quite well on his own, although I still hope he records with Beverly again, but Capitol, Island's parent label, is totally ignoring the album, refusing to acknowledge its existence. What a tragedy. If this sells it will be because of a fluke, or maybe through a review such as this or if some smart DJ's (there's got to be some out there) pick up on it and start richening the air waves with it. John is very talented, and his music could have mass appeal if only the masses could hear it.

Most of the music is quiet, easy going folk exemplified by the title cut and "Go Easy". But the other stuff is what gives this LP variety and some astoundingly beautiful musical moments. The best thing here, for example, "Glistening Glyndebourne" which just builds and builds and is quite exciting. It sounds, as does much of Martyn's work, like quiet toned down, folky Traffic songs. The percussion on the entire album is quite good, an integral part of Matyn's folk-jazz fusion. And we are also treated to a curious old rock type vocal on "Sugar Lump", which stands out but fits in. This album as a whole is a thoroughly pleasant listening experience. There may be a lot of solo singer-songwriters going around today but few have as much going for them as John Martyn. Give him a try.

IT IS AND IT ISN'T -- Gordon Haskell - Atco SD 33-378

One of the nicest music listening experiences comes when you discover a wounderful record when you are not expecting it. The only thing I knew about Gordon Haskell prior to listening to this album was that he contributed his talents to the last two King Crimson albums, In the Wake of Poseidon and Lizard. I didn't know what type of music to expect on this album: I really didn't think about it.

It Is and It Isn't doesn't sound at all like King Crimson. It is not complex music, it is not head music that King Crimson is noted for. It is, however, a well planned, cohesive musical statement by Gordon Haskell about Gordon Haskell. Although he isn't the only person playing on the album, it is more of a "solo" album than most that are given that tag. It contains Haskell's thoughts about life, and it is an intense, personal album. It comes off as reflections on life by a man who has seen and been through a lot and has a definite view of how he wants to live his life. That life, as described here, is that of simple pleasures, taking it easy, and enjoying himself equally with and without friends. Just the song titles give you an indication of that; "Just a Lovely Day", "Sitting By the Fire", "Learning Not To Feel". The music is deceptively simple. The lyrics range from straightforward and obvious to heavy and cryptic. "No Meaning" is the best song I've heard describing ones feelings on a lazy, carefree day; "I'll sing a song without meaning, and everything's fine/I'll sing a song without feeling, and rest your mind". I may be merely reading too much between the lines and looking for hidden meanings when they are not there, but there may be a reference to the King Crimson days in that song in the lines "Hi, dragonfly guzzing along colorful sight and doing no wrong/ Committing no crime making it rhyme/ Long comes a LIZARD out of the slime" (boldface in the lyric sheet, not my conclusion). Lizard, of course, being King Crimson's third album. Only my imagination, I'm sure.

There are more easygoing, carefree lyrics abounding on this album. From "Could Be"; "I could dig living in a cave by the sea, and listening to the rolling waves/ I don't dig electric lights anyway, And I think of all the money I'd save/ Sure would make a natural grave". And from "Learning"; "Don't ever let me get complicated, Leave me on the farm/ Don't ever let me get overrated, My life is cool and calm". Then again, he can be quite strange, as in a song called "Worms", which deals with just that, at least on the surface. He gets away with lines like "No-one's more important than the Earthworm."

Most of Gordon's instrumental backup is subdued and mainly unobtrusive. It is relied upon most for the two most rockish songs (this definitely can't be called a rock album), "Worms" and "Sitting by the Fire". On "Learning Not To Feel" and "Benny", there is no backup at all, just Gordon singing and playing acoustic guitar. Most of the songs are quite melodious and catchy. "No Need" sounds like it could have been written by Carole King. It's got that breezy, free moving style. "Spider" is light and catchy, singing about "danger chambers" and "trouble bubbles". "Just A Lovely Day" begins and ends with a beautiful lullaby melody which I remember hearing when I was a little kid, but I can't remember exactly where. It sounds like the pretty tunes you used to get out of those old wind-up boxes that played only one song. The kind of thing you get a great kick out of when you are little and then get a kick out of it when you're older, for different reasons.

Gordon Haskell has bared his soul to us and showed that he is an open, honest, and perceptive individual. His album sounds like it was a long time in the making and each second was lovingly thought out. It is one of those albums which you must concentrate on and listen to for a while before it makes an impression on you. An enormous talent has emerged from the shadows to give us some beautiful music. Gordon Haskell could well be on his way to being one of the most important music makers of the day. He's worth paying attention to.

5'LL GETCHA TEN -- Cowboy - Capricorn SD 864

When country music got to be a big thing recently, everyone decided to jump on the bandwagon and everone was in cowboy get-ups singing country songs and buying pedal steel guitars, and developing a southern accent, and generally doing whatever necessary to prove to the world that they were "genuine down-home" A lot of these people were about as down-home as your corner delicatessen. But then there are the bands who are worth it. And Cowboy is one of them. Cowboy is from Georgia, but they don't come on like shitkickers' delight, or drunken rednecks kickin' ass at the Pig Farm Roadside Cafe, but as a penetrating, intense band who uses country music as a vehicle to express its personal ideas and there is no rock in their playing, no blues, no jazz, just tasty tight country music. Cowboy reminds me of Poco in the early and peaking stages of that band's career. They are optimistic without being naive, their lyrics are no nonsense with a good deal of insight. The excessiveness and loose ends of their debut LP, Reach For The Sky, are gone on 5'll Getcha Ten. Not a second is wasted. You won't be knocked out by this album on one listening. It takes time to grow on you, to sink in; but once it does, it leaves an indelible impression. Albums like these are the most rewarding, they take time and devotion to get into, but when it all clicks, it becomes a special part of you.

The material is all original, and Cowboy has three proficient songwriters, Tommy Talton, Scott Boyer, and Bill Pillmore. The latter's piano playing is delightful. It is always there jangling away in the background, but not too far back. It always seems to add the right touch and needed effect. It's rather difficult to describe the material; most of it is slower songs, although the tempo picks up a bit on things like "Hey There Babe", on which the group sounds the most like Poco, "Shoestrings", and "Right ON Friend".

You can't dance to Cowboy's music, you can't boogie to it. They are not loud, and I hope this doesn't hurt their chances of being heard over all the shouting. 5'll Getcha Ten is the kind of album that you listen to when you are really depressed and need something to help you get back to normal, and when you are in such a bad mood that you need something to calm you down and relax yourself before you start destroying everything around you. Cowboy may make relaxing music, but it is not easy listening. It takes time, but it's worth waiting for.

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PERFORMANCE

Openings: THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY at the Folget Theatre. Dec, 14. I expect excitement, at least.
STORY THEATRE at the Eisenhower.
PROMISES, PROMISES at the National.
SHAKESPEARE'S JULIUS CAESAR directed by Jonathon Miller opens at St. Albans.

Note: KING LEAR a new film by Peter Brook has opened at the Outer Circle 1, and since Brook is one of the three most important stage directors in the world, people interested in theatre should make an effort to see it. Brook's earlier films, Marat-Sade and Lord of the Flies, were memorable cinema, and his breakthrough stage productions of Marat-Sade and A Midsummer Night's Dream were revolutionary. Paul Scofield plays Lear, as he did in Brook's stage version.

BOB AND RAY, THE TWO AND ONLY
at Ford's Theatre

MAD MAGAZINE INTRODUCED my nubile consciousness to Bob and Ray in the late 50s or early 60s, in the days when MAD was the underground press in its entirety, at least in its satirical entirety. Mad was at its peak with greasy, pimply satires on everything from King Kong and Superman to Jughead and Archie, and the clean neat figures of Bob and Ray drawn by a manic Mad artist almost seemed out of place, appearing as specters from the future world of Henry Kissinger and Spiro Agnew. But there was a zany edge to the ordinary world of Bob and Ray and that zany edge is still with them at Ford's Theatre.

If you haven't seen them yet, and if you ever had a taste for Mad or business-suited crazies, don't read anymore, but immediately get your hands on a ticket. I'll give some idea of their performance, but only Bob and Ray, and sometimes Mad, can give you Bob and Ray. They don't give you much of Bob and Ray, at that, becoming or assuming the guises of Wally Ballou and Larry Lovebreath, Tommy Rote (pronounced rot) and the McBeebee twins among others at the drop of a handclap.

The total madness of television interviews is brought to life as Ray Goulding interviews a Komodo Dragon expert of infinite patience played by none other than Bob Elliott. The long slow cataloging of facts continues from the expert while, Ray, having blissfully ignored the answers to his questions repeatedly asks the questions the expert has answered. And pushing the interviews that insane step further from realitym to the late night show, Larry Lovebreath cheerfully welcomes that well known "gournet gourmand, roué and raconteur" Martin LeSoeur, who proceeds to forget the ends of his anecdotes.

A change of glasses, hats, perhaps a scarf wrapped around the neck and there's an entirely new guest or entirely new show guaranteed to win your "studio audience" applause as the interview with this year's Miss Beautiful Face, Mr. Bob Elliot, or the heart rending concession speech by the candidate who set a record for campaigh spending, followed by an instant analysis of his speech meaning absolutely nothing.

striking very close to the rush hour drivers in the audience was an interview with a manufacturer of signs that bring in fines for impoverished municipalities. For example, consider, "DON"T NOT MAKE LEFT TURN EXCEPT 7-10 5-8" or "QUIET ZONE EXCEPT TUES AND THURS", "The only time you can make noise there is on Tuesday", the manufacturer tells the audience.

What, me worry? Not with Bob and Ray, (through Dec. 19)

-N. C.

* * * *

CURSE YOU, SPREAD EAGLE
at Washington Theatre Club

THERE IS A DISCLAIMER in Curse You, Spread Eagle's program that if a topical revue is going to stay topidal it's going to change, and the printed program was superceded by a mimeographed sheet listing the changes in the show. There seemed to be no topical reason the changes, however, but a tightening up of the show and a move for a more spectacular finale. This is fine with me, but I wish they wouldn't justify the changes in terms of topicality. In fact, there is little in the show that justifies calling it a topical revue.

There is surprisingly little political humor for a Washington show, but the level does rise to satire in one sketch on capitalism in which Sesame Street's educational approach is taken to Wall Street. Satire is unfortunately absent in the rest of the show, and I can only conclude the producers subscribe to the mediocre wisdom that satire closes on Saturday night. The show is intended to appeal to a certain audience and if the opening night was typical that audience is overwhelmingly white, largely middle-aged and liberal. There is nothing in the show to offend them, or, for that matter, anybody else. The most daring thing in the show is the cast giving the finger to Bob SHort for taking the baseball team to Texas.

I don't mean to imply that the evening is unrewarding. The cast is quite good, particularly Marcia Lewis and Carleton Carpenter, who is consistently warm and engaging. I was very drawn to Ann Hodapp's Edith Piaf imitation in Don Tucker's wonderfully funny "French Song". The "Pullout" sketch opens the second act is interesting in that it employs an abstract style th: that recalls Beckett and Pinter.

The great triumph of the show is its finale, however, and its success is a comment on some of the failings that have preceded it. It is a gloriously theatrical number that brings out all the conventions of the thirties' musical, and it is its theatricality that makes it work. Too much of what has gone before has merely used, not exploited, the familiar style of television variety shows, and when we are finally thrust into an unabashedly theatrical experience the effect is wonderful.

-J.R.

* * * *

THE THREE CUCKOLDS
at American University Theatre

I HAD NEVER SEEN AN example of commedia dell'arte before and it was with some misgivings that I went to The Three Cuckolds. I was skeptical of the ability of amatuer actors to bring off an example of the improvisational comedy of sixteenth century Italy.

Their good intelligence, the charm of their performance and the carefully mounted improvisational structures, are, unfortunately likely to lead them into television rather than into new valid theatre forms. If I turn on Laugh In and see Shelley I won't by surprised, and certainly each of them would brighten television, but the track record is so dismal, and I'd prefer to see them work for an audience.

Washington could do with a company like the Proposition, for those evenings when you want to do nothing but laugh, but in spite of the new buildings, the Kennedy Center and all those dinner theatres, there wasn't even half an audience for the Proposition at the Smithsonian. If the Arena ever opens its cabaret, and is for tunate enough to get a good improvisational group, (it already has a great one, but we won't see the Living Stage in a cabaret) I hope soneone goes to see the show.

One last mention, of the Very Important Piano of Diane Bulgarelli, since the music so effectively bridges and underlines the action when it's not guiding the action. In those expected moments when the improvisation fails for a second, the piano keeps the show alive and moving.

-N. C.

* * * *

THE PROPOSITION
at the Smithsonian Natural History Auditorium

BOSTON HAS GIVEN a lot to the theatre in America, and its most recent home-baked offering is the Proposition, an improvisational musical revue that's been running for four years in Boston for a long time off Broadway, and has now visited Washington twice in the last two months. Thses events are simultaneous, for the Propostion
Propositionis a many-headed experiment growing out of the single Boston company with talent enough, it appears, to run three good companies under the hand of director Allan Albert.

The reviews for their October visit were raves, so the Smithsonian brought the company back, greatly altered, to give Washington's theatre goers a better chance to see a performance. I imagine the Smithsonian was disappointed, an institution can be disappointed, in the apethetic reluctance those theatre goers showed to visit the museum auditorium. It was a lack of judgement not to visit the show, since it was sprightly, imaginative and vibra vibrant with talent, but it seems likely that you and your children will be able to watch the Proposition at home, if a projected television deal goes through for sixteen Proposition children shows.

I said it showed a lack of judgement not to visit the show, but that should be qualified. If what you seek from an evening out, even occasionally, is entertainment and pleasure, you missed a good deal of that. I f what you seek is something less ephemeral, a deep experience, a rich, considered presentation of ideas, it would n't have done you any good. The Proposition offers you a quick skittering laugh at the funny surfaces of easy targets, then bounces on to some other easy target.

It's good to say, considering that, that the work is without malice and that the talents abounding in the cast had an eady, open exchange. And here director Albert should be acknowledged, for the talents assembled perfectly balanced each other in the small cabaret sized company. Actor Peter Johnson, who appeared here both times, had a little to say about what he received from the others members of the company; he found himself too cerebral, but brought into a brought into a greater awareness of his body by the grace and movement of Gerri Librandi, who also made both visits. Shelley Burns, new on this last trip, gave a rich musical balance with her singing in this arrangement of talents and David Berzniak, "Jewish character actor", kept his aware of the quick characterizations needed.

With his observations in mind, I watched the show, and though there may have been truth to what he said, for certainly he was most cerebral and Gerri was physical and Shelley improvised beautiful, hilarious songs in her fine voice, and David improvised quick characters, including a Jewish 50s Rock and Roll singer, they all did far more than that. Peter's movement was practiced and controlled, but perfectly graceful; Gerri made rapid character shifts with great imagination (though I have reservations about her Lily Tomlin), and David's improvisation of Adam singing in a musical about the garden of Eden perfectly captured a Broadway musical as dreadful as the mythological "Springtime for Hitler".

The style of the Proposition is to give the audience a chance to control key elements in the improvisation, while keeping a very rigid format for support. Thus, there will be representatives of three colleges discussing a subject. The audience chooses the colleges and the subject, but the show's going to be there every night, and the actors may tend to categorize schools as a short cut. The night I was there, the schools were UCLA, Bob Jones, and Notre Dame and the subject was Nixon's trip to China. The characterizations fit happily, with David becoming a slightly slow Catholic athlete, Shelley becoming a God-fearing Babtist for Bob Jones and Gerri becoming a spacey hippy coed for UCLA. But, those characterizations, while improvised to the subject at hand, are a little easy to fit into a number of schools, though David may have to give up Catholicism and become simply a slow athlete for another sports conscious college.

The good thing about the formulaes, is that they usually work, Almost all of their improvisations are done to music, or with a music background and though it is occasionally obvious that something has almost been done before, most things have high points

that are fresh in the show. Shelley's improvised blues song, about raising chickens in Topeka, may have been almost done before but it works because it is the blues idiom that works, because a blues song about anything is an always recognizable blues.

In the same way, the rock song by David works because the basic shoobie-doo background works and he was capable of rhyming the name given by the audience and improvised a love song about "Latka, lovely as vodka", full of a greasy story of being a teenager.

Their story theatre moment, a standard improvisational technique with a narration of a fairy tale chosen by the audience, slips through a number of television styles, and in the case of the Rumpelstiltskin played for us, the program ended with a game show of "Name That Dwarf" splendidly saving the damsel.

Their skill with theatre forms is nice too, as in the three plays enacted by them representing Tennessee Williams, Sophocles and Samuel Beckett, our audience choices, taking place, again by audience choice, in a Chinese Restaurant. The Williams characters, torridly, pervertedly, enact a sex ritual over "Peking Duck with chitlins." In the Sophocles piece, Peter complains, "When one eats the food of the gods, after three weeks, one is hungry again." And ultimately, in the Beckett piece, after an existential debate over whether to open the fortune cookie; it is opened, and naturally, it's blank.

Well, the improvisation is gone, but the comedy is there in the form of a script Leon Katz has drawn from a traditional scenario, and it is very funny.

Dr. Bruce Zortman has directed his actors to a stylized acting that is the most comfortable performance in this alien style, but the whole cast does well. A very nice note was set by the addition of musical interludes from the period. My only argument with Dr. Zortman's direction was the lack of slapstick in the form that gave it its name.

The thing that struck me most, however, is how much of our comedy is derived from commedia. The Marx Brothers would have fit into commedia perfectly, and the blustering old man Gale Gordon has made a career of, is a direct descendent of Pantalone

What this comes down to is that the stock characters of the commedia are human types caught on their own foibles, and their comedy os our own.

-J. R.

BOOKS

THE GAY INSIDER by John Francis Hunter. Olympia Press, paperback, 300 pages, $2.95 . (Review by Paul Hayes)

Heterosexual society does not have to publish guide books to its social world, least of all to New York City. Even the popular race, color, and sex taboos never stopped anyone from intermingling with his fellow man. That is to say, as long as one's fellow man is straight. In the light of this inconsistency of prejudices, it is pleasing to find that The Gay Insider, by its very nature, is a book about, and for, homosexuals only.

The Gay Insider was written for all of you who want to know where to go once you've left the closet. Like Lowell Thomas and Malcomb Muggeridge before him, J. F. Hunter has written an informative guidebook, not to darkest London or to swinging Africa but to gay New York City.

Mr. Hunter's book is nothing else if it is not thorough. Fun City emerges as a city with literally something for everyone.

"One can walk down a street in Gotham and assume, at times correctly, that the whole world is gay... In New York there is a place for you, whatever your persuasion...the swingingest city in the country. It's a Fellini movie... (and) New York is not likely to fall backwards short of a declaration of martial law by Washington. But, chances are; (it) is going to remain in the vanguard of the cultural revolution until we reach the high ground."

Bars, baths, streets, parks, beaches, resorts, hotels, rest rooms and theater balconies are only some of the "hunting grounds" that the author explores with somewhat "goyish" humor. My favorite chapter was probably "Going Down On Your Knees -- To Pray", which listed the churches in Gotham that encourage gay attendance. For those of you who are curious, the majority of churches in Mr. Hunter's listing are Episcopalian.

In his introduction, John Hunter suggests that even if the reader never cruises, he can still have a few "vicarious kicks" with him. This is essentially the only fault in the book. In relating his past triumphs in cruising, he lapses into explicit (though curt) pornographic prose. While homoerotica can be defended (Hunter does so by quoting gay poet laureate, W. H. Auden), its placement in this book is still rather obtrusive and smacks of a rather lewd type of breast-beating.

Although it was not his stated intention, Hunter managed to rather graphically describe the gay experience in today's urban centers:

"If we are going to go to bars, we are going to be putting money into hetero-establishment pockets. To find an independantly operated, open-and-above-board, gay-owned bar is like finding a really successful streetwalker in the West Fifies who doesn't belong to the Local Hookers' Local, as it were. The underworld muscle is wherever there is success. Such is the utilitarian morality of a materialistic, sexist society that pleasure is often sin and sin is often crime -- unless you can afford the price. In the end, it is the "respectable" people who are causing the trouble, you know. The status quo-dedicated churchmen and politicians and rigidly fanatical moralists -- to whom profit and wealth and private property are more precious than the mental health of the people -- are in the vanguard of sexual repression."

Despite a few similar tangents, The Gay Insider is not overtly political -- it is, firstly and lastly, the gay guidebook. That not withstanding, however, it's obvious that the book is a product of an era of homosexual militancy. Perhaps, because of its nature, (where to go, what to avoid), The Gay Insider is, in fact, more informative about the gay life-style than Donn Teal's highly touted The Gay Militants. It is, finally, more reflective of the basic theme of the Gay Liberation Movement: Gay is Proud.

SPEED a novel/autobiography by William Burroughs, Jr.
The Olympia Press / OPS #2, paperback, 191 pp. $1.25 .
(Reviewed by Ed Pitts)

"Correctly understood (which it too seldom is), psychedelic experience paticipates significantly in the young's most radical rejection of the parental society." -- T. Roszak, in
The Making of a Counter Culture

Too many writers today are too eager to tell us the why's and wherefore's of the "youth culture". The quote above is a shining example of the too often used simplicstic ideas of the so-called experts. Books like Roszak's are only helpful to the uninitiated, young and middle-aged alike. They explain to those who want too badly to understand why things are like they are. But Americans were always eager for "How to Understand, In One Easy Lesson" books.

Once in a while, there is an exception to this type of exploitation. Giving the writer the benefit of the doubt (I believe he did not write this book for the morbid mob) I can find in Speed a real glance into the commonly misunderstood. Burrough, Jr. lets us see through his eyes; but best , he lets us see with his personal style. This is a style so right, so clear, it seduces me. Burroughs is incredible, that is, he is too credible. The book, if this is possible, is truer than fact. He not only tells us about himself, meth, NYC, and jail, but takes us there.

We might expect this from a Burroughs, however. (His father in his first book, Junkie, gave us a reliable account of an unseen world.) The difference is that Burroughs, Sr. is on the outside. Nothing he can say rings quite as true as his son's work.

Let me give some examples from Speed :

"Schell stopped the car to let him off at U.S. 1. I waited until we were some distance away and them waved to see if he was still watching the car. If your friends watch you go, go back."

-- Or this impression from his visit to the Tombs:

"A fine upstanding citizen if he had any education at all, would be awed and frightened I think, by the endless labyrynth of gleaming steel and glass tunnels, passing pens of captured people that he never thinks about without wondering where his kids are tonight."

-- And when his father's friend Allen Ginsberg bailed him out for the second time:

"It was Allen, St. Christopher Allen, who had saved me again... We went to his place to go through the lawyer bit again and while we were talking a couple of dizzy college girls came to see him bearing a pan of homemade brownies. Never look a gift horse in the pan, so we took them out to Chinatown for dinner."

I end up asking myself some questions. If I were going to write a book about myself and publish it, who would I write it for?

Burroughs probably answered that question with a quick "I don't give a shit! " ... but there is a lingering doubt about that. And then there is the question of why he waited three years to publish it.

In all, it is a small, readable book. A book, not about growing up in 1967, not about speed, and not about Burroughs, yet, indirectly about all of these. Burroughs growing up in his grandmother's house, dropping in and out of various familiar scenes, making it to NYC, and living out the summer. He, in the process of telling us this simple pattern (it is a pattern, not a story), lets us join him. I became him for the hour or two it takes to read his book andin that time I discovered more of myself. I didn't get to know him very well. His writing lacks polish and professionalism. Through these two problems that usually plague writers, and because of them, we can see.

Still, the book fails in many areas. It is over-done in some sections. It is redundant. The characters are sketchy and inexact. We never get to know them well enough to understand any of their constant troubles. Burroughs, Jr. is not yet a novelist. He cannot even be called a writer. He is closer to a photographer. What we end up seeing is an uncut version of one summer. Thus, it is boring in parts, funny in parts, and very life-like. It is a fun book, relaxing, but by no means a work of consequence.

Speed succeeds where scholarly description has failed. It shows a real, breathing, sucking life. It is a first work and a promising work by Burroughs. I hope he writes more. I certainly advise those who want to remember their 1967 summer to pick this book up and read it. Once. Then, wait for Burroughs to become a writer.

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MAC and the EPIC

by Bill Garrison

Now, you can't remember, that far back, before pollution, before the car, before Christ; back when things were a little bit better than they are now in Greece, there was a male human being of indeterminate age and no wealth whose name was Homer, and who had several problems, the principal one being that he was blind.

At that time, also, the wealthy didn't need to work, so they talked a lot, played games and messed around in politics.

The unwealthy worked their asses off.

The unwealthy who couldn't work, because of physical or mental problems, had to beg to survive.

Since people don't change much, there were a lot of beggars and the competition for alms was heavy.

So, Homer had to get it on.

Since Homer couldn't see, he did a lot of listening. He heard the unwealthy working, grunts, ughs, and heavy breathing. He heard the wealthy talking, words, words and the sound of heavy clinking around.

So Homer started talking with his hand out. He started telling stories. He started telling stories in a musical way, so they would immediately be noticed among the surrounding discordant sounds. He started telling longer and longer stories so that people could get interested and pay him to go on.

As you know, Homer became a poet and didn't starve to death. He beat out the competition with his two epic poems and got the alms for himself.

Homer started something with all that. He had some copyright problems, but it takes some doing to memorize one of those long poems, not many were able to do it. And folks said, "If you really want to get into that poem, you gotta hear Homer get it on." So, other people began coming up with their own poems; other beggars, blind or not, malingerers, malcontents, even disgruntled rich people got into making up poems and it was a sort of scent that hung around a long time.

Eventually, another type of people got interested in the phenomenon, though not to make up their own poetry... they didn't have enough desire for that, they weren't rich and bored, nor poor and hungry. This type of person was just comfortable enough to not want to risk what they had in order to get something else. But, they wanted to get in on the poetry scene in some way.

So they started explaining poetry to everybody.

And bored the asses off of everybody that heard them.

And poetry became something set aside for those who were comfortable yet out of it enough to be bored anyway. A lot of the most boring poetry hung around English Departments in high schools and colleges and became an intricate word game that only the initiates could play.

But lately, things have begun to change a little. The academic poetry is still around, but there are a few poets hanging around who are into poetry for reality. Not realistic poetry, if there is such a thing, but poems for genuine enjoyment, poems for real people who don't want something to be interpreted for them.

The academics keep trying to stuff these peots, trying to injest and digest them. That's all right, all they can get are the peanut shells and walnut husks of them; the meat stays on the street. These poets aren't afraid to deliver their goods personally; they aren't afraid to stand up and read their work with people around.

When a poet gets up and reads a strange thing can happen. A poem which looks great on paper can turn into crap when it's delivered by voice. And a poem which may look rather strange on paper can turn into gold when it's spoken. Some poems, of course, you can have both ways.

Homer developed long poems, epic poems, poems as long as three Giants, four Fantasias, and two French Connections put together. Homer figured he could get more going in one long poem than in hundred of smaller poems and it would make a better performance in the bargain. But the epic poem hasn't been as popular as poetry in general. Perhaps it's because it's a lot more more work than a hundred smaller poems, a lot more effort to make it hang together. Perhaps it's because you can't sandwich an epic poem between two articles in a magazine.

There are a few people around who are into the long poem. Mac Wellman is one of them.

Mac's been aorking on Memory for over two years and is a little over half-way through. Memory will be twenty cantoes and Mac is now working on canto thirteen.

Two weeks ago, Mac read parts of Memory at the Spiritual Life Center at American University. That was the only place he could get to read it. The Spiritual Life Center is not a terrific place to read the newspaper, much less a poem. But, it will hold a fair amount of bodies and the acoustics aren't too bad, you can be heard.

So, Mac read Cantos Six, Ten, and Twelve to about thirty people who'd managed to find the place.

Memory is like all the good things you remember from at least a year ago, with all the dismal incidents turned upside down and inside out for the funny way it seems now. All the "first-times are there intact, all the frustrations and horniness converted to satisfaction.

Imagine, if you can, a comix epic dealing with a post-historical wasted landscape in the vicinity of what is now Lake Erie, imagine a world gone through cataclysmic changes which sank the West Coast into the sea, leaving only mountain tops extant, labeled the "Californias", imagine on the bog-slopes of the mid-continent lakes, the stumbling remnants of a people feebly working toward a social organization with a patchwork assemblage of scraps of our "civilization" and "heritage". Imagine this all overlooked by a god named Mac, old testament capricious, but with a custard pie sense of humor, and you begin to sense the flavor of Mac Wellman's poem.

"Imagination and Memory are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names," is the quote from Hobbes with which Mac begins his poem. The poem is both Memory and Fantasy and it is about Memory and Fantasy. And, it is very funny.

Now, Mac's poem is memory and Mac can remember not only back in 1957, but on through the interstices of synapsal conjuction to the common pool of rememberance in Homer's time Memory reels with gas stations and junk piles, the first big freeway near your house, you first near-copulation, the first time you threw a quarter into the toll booth maw. Memory glistens with nymphs and gnomes, sylphs and airy spirits, Proteus, Persephone, Merin, daemons dark and light and broken glass all around.

Mac's chosen subjects, Orlando and Wiresmith persue their different quests through "America's" fallen out of the world of memory. Orlando's out to find his mind and memory and write the great philosophical tract and pull it all together. Wiresmith dodges trash and seeks his head in order to put together the great "American Film" and free his people.

Orlando and Wiresmith aren't much more together than the other occupants in memory. They keep forgetting things and ending up in the wrong place. They doggedly follow their separate bypaths and sidetracks until Mac dispairs and intervenes or one of the lesser magicaians postulates a non-euclidian theorum which twists the air and mangles the general run of purpose.

I don't want to get very explicit in any of this description of Memory. I just want you to know I like it and think many others will like it too. If you really want them, a few copies of Cantos Ten and Twelve are available, free, if you call Mac at 244-1062. And, if you hear he's reading anywhere, it's worth the trip.

[NOTE: Mac Wellman, Harvey Fry, and others will read at EMERGENCY on Wed., January 12]

FOOD

WASHINGTON REVIEWING SOCIETY

For the nocturnal wanderer who finds himself navigating Arlington's blank late Friday or Saturday night streets and still has his head together enough for a stiff cultural mix, a good place to hit is Mario's Pizza on Wilson Boulevard (3322, just after Clarendon Circle.)

Mario's attracts as great a mix of clientel as you could imagine in America; strung out freaks to skin-head drunks, acned adolescents to octogenarians, hungry and bored.

Mario's Pizza... Italian originators, Indian staff, and everybody coming in the door...

The house carries a full round of late night fast food: coffee and coke, donuts, subs and pizza. The general level is close to average, but the sausage sub will distend all of your bodily tissue.

I first hit Mario's two weeks ago, looking for pizza about one in the morning, Sunday morning, but when I walked in the door the overwhelming odor, the prebailing presence, was of the sausage on the grill.

The sub comes on a twelve inch roll for the large size. The roll isn't much. A sausage sub with everything includes mustard and mayonnaise, chopped onion and a handful of dill pickle slices. Nothing spectacular about the "works" either.

The two large, well done patties of "our own home-made Italian sausage" is the essence and reality of the sausage sub. If it's good the rest doesn't matter. The roll is just a handle. The "works" just fill in if you hit some minor corner the sausage missed.

And Mario's sausage is the best. You inhale that sausage before you bite it, you have it in your mouth before you realize what you've gotten into. And, when you grind it with your molars and your eyes quint and your nose opens, your entire gustatory capacity comes on full.

I came back later for more sausage and sampled the pizza. It may have been the power of the sausage, but the pizza seemed very ordinary, on a middling firm crust, very little crunch. The steak subs are better than average, though I feel the area average is rather low. The cokes are good.

Pizza is sold by the slice (square slice) at $.25 single, $2.50 for twelve. The large sausage sub is $1.75 .

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